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Cell Phone Interference Getting Worse on Police Radios  
By Jonathan Salant  
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WASHINGTON -- The proliferation of cell phones is having potentially dangerous consequences for firefighters and police officers, who in some places can't use their radios to call for help because of interference from cell signals.

The Boston suburb of Cambridge, Mass., is one of those areas. Last fall, an officer responding to a fight at an apartment had to walk to the other side of the high-rise to call for backup. Another time, an officer responding to a burglar alarm couldn't call for help as he approached the building.

In both incidents, the delays didn't cause any major problems for officers. But the potential is there, said Cambridge Fire Chief Gerald Reardon, who oversees the city's entire public safety radio system.

Radios used by police, firefighters and other first responders broadcast on the same 800 megahertz broadcast spectrum as cell phones. So, for example, if a radio dispatch is made at 850 MHz near a cell tower broadcasting at 851 MHz, the radio signal can get drowned out.

The problem is serious enough that police and firefighters have been urging the government to come up with a fix. Federal regulators are expected to do that in the next few weeks.

Still, a battle is raging within the cell phone industry over what the government should do.

On one side of the cell phone debate is Nextel Communications, whose frequencies are interspersed among those belonging to public safety. Its phones cause the most interference.

Nextel was assigned the frequencies by the Federal Communications Commission prior to the cell phone boom, when it was thought the 800 MHz spectrum could handle public safety and cell phone needs.

On the other side is the rest of the wireless industry - including the trade group that counts Nextel as a member - as well as municipalities and electric utilities that broadcast over the 800 MHz band, and government watchdog groups National Taxpayers Union and Citizens Against Government Waste.

The Nextel-backed plan would divide the 800 MHz band, giving one section to public safety agencies and another to cell companies. That idea is backed by various national law enforcement groups, as well as Mitchell's fire chiefs association.

Opponents want to leave the spectrum alone, but require each company that causes interference to eliminate it at its own cost after a public safety agency reports a problem.□